

Trinity VII
St. Stephen's, Athens
July 15th, 2018

My text this morning is taken from the 23rd verse of the 6th chapter of the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Romans:

The gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Some of you may recall the ACC Ordo Kalendar last year that featured the art of Nancy Wilds. If you don't know about Ms. Wilds, she's the one who designed the windows here at St. Stephen's, and, as you can probably tell by looking around you, she draws her much of inspiration from the art of the middle ages. A number of her works are illustrations of prayers from the Prayer Book done in the style of illuminated manuscripts. When we published the kalendar we used these to illustrate each month of the year, but on the cover we had something more direct and simple—it was a picture of a young man at prayer with the caption, “The Prayer Book is a work of Art.”

I think most folks here would agree with that statement, and I do too, but I think it's also quite interesting to think of the Prayer Book in what many might consider to be exactly the opposite way. That is, to say that the Prayer Book is a remarkable piece of technology. Now, some folks (especially the young people who live in my house) may be surprised that I would use the term “technology” to describe something without a plug, or a battery, or a screen, but it's true. The Prayer Book is an example of a type of technology that changed the world. To see what I mean, it would help to consider the way that writing was presented and preserved in the ancient world, particularly in the ages prior to the triumph of the Church.

As most of us know, the most common medium for preserving writing among the Greeks and Romans, and before that the Egyptians and the Jews, was the papyrus or vellum scroll, and while this type of book may have had certain advantages, finding one's place easily was not one of them. To get to a particular section or passage you had to roll the paper back and forth, much like a VCR or cassette tape, always being careful not to twist the material too loose or too tight. When dealing with particularly long pieces of writing, like the books of the Bible, it could take a tremendous amount of time to wind your way from section to another. Now, this might be fine if you're spending a leisurely afternoon reading Pindar in the library at Alexandria, but it's not so good if you're in some way responsible for the worship of the church.

Imagine, for example, you're the lector in a monastery, and for one of the services, you have to read passages from different parts of a scroll. This is fine if your readings are close together, or you've got plenty of time to search, but if you've got a big scroll and are trying to get this done before your fellow monks finish reciting whatever prayer or psalm might be in between, you may find yourself on the spot without anything to read. This is one of those places where necessity is the mother of invention, as readers who needed to find things quickly figured out a better way. The answer was to do what an educated Roman of the classical era would have thought was crazy—that is chop up the scrolls into eight or ten-inch pages and bind them together between two boards for protection. This created the codex, or what we now think of generically as “a book.”

In terms of public worship, what the codex did was enable a lector to switch very quickly from one type of reading to another by using a catchword or bookmark. The priest does this at the Missal half a dozen times in the course of saying the mass, and it's something you may have done just a few minutes ago, when in your Prayer Book you flipped from the section containing the order for communion over to the Epistle and Gospel, and then back again to the beginning for the recitation of the Creed. Imagine how different that would be if you had to twist and tighten your scroll to get back and forth. So, what we see here is that one of the great advantages of the codex is that it allows the user random access to information, something that was all but impossible with the scroll.

This had important ramifications in terms of the intellectual and economic development of the West, as people found uses for this new technology outside the Church. Books became more plentiful because costs went down, since with a codex, you could be more efficient by using both sides of the paper. Indices allowed for quick access to information, because with a codex, you can number the pages and don't have to read to find your place. But perhaps most importantly, for our purposes here, the codex made it easier to cross reference; to set one text up against another and make useful comparisons. This may not seem like a big deal to us until we think of how the concept of multiple “windows” on a screen revolutionized the world of personal computing. And the amazing thing here is that the impetus behind technological revolution can be traced back to the needs of the early Church.

Now at this point, people may be wondering why I've spent so much time talking about the history of the codex. Well, aside from the fact that I think it's interesting, and probably important to remember in this age of power-point-worship, the main reason is that the Book of Common Prayer is an excellent example of how the ability to cross reference teaches us new and important things; and this, I suppose, is where art comes back into the conversation. We see this artistry in the way the Church organizes the Major Propers (that

is the Collect, Epistle, and Gospel for each day) around a common theme. Take, for example, our readings for today, where the overriding theme is the manner in which our sin-sick souls receive the gift of everlasting life. With that in mind, what I'd like to do now, is to go briefly through our readings with this in mind, tracing our theme from its introduction through to its natural conclusion. So, let's begin with the Collect.

Our Collect is the translation of a Latin prayer taken from the Gelasian Sacramentary, an ancient liturgical manual that is the forerunner of our modern missals. It was put together in France sometime in the middle of the 8th century, but it contains prayers and blessings that date back to the earliest days of the church. The central petition of our Collect today is that God "graft into our hearts the love of [his] name...and nourish us with all goodness." The language here is agricultural and it draws on one of the most well-known metaphors in New Testament. In John 15:5-8, we read:

I am the vine, ye are the branches: He that abideth in me, and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit: for without me ye can do nothing. If a man abide not in me, he is cast forth as a branch, and is withered; and men gather them, and cast them into the fire, and they are burned... Herein is my Father glorified, that ye bear much fruit...

Here Our Lord is using the language of horticulture to show the difference between our fallen nature and that which we receive through the love of Christ. In short, man in his natural state is like a healthy branch on a diseased plant. Without some sort of intervention, the sickness will take over, and the branch will eventually wither and die. In order to live, it must be grafted onto new stock, where it will bear new and healthy fruit. In other words, our nature is so corrupt that we must be joined wholly and organically with Christ in order to survive. How is that done? Well, through baptism, initially, which is like the cut that severs the branch from the diseased stem, and then through participation in the life of the Church, which provides the nourishment that is necessary for the rootless branch to survive.

This idea of participation in the Christian community is expanded upon in our Epistle, where Paul uses the image of the vine and its fruits to remind us both of the gift we are given in Christ, and what the result of that gift should be in our lives. He asks in verse 21, *what fruit had ye...in those things whereof ye are now ashamed? For the end of those things is death.* He then goes on to say *but now being made free from sin...ye have your fruit until holiness and the end everlasting life.* This is clearly a reference to Our Lord's admonishment about knowing men by their fruits. *Do men gather grapes of thorns, or figs of thistles? Even so every good tree bringeth forth good fruit; but a corrupt tree bringeth forth evil fruit...wherefore by their fruits ye shall know them.*

What Paul is doing here, then, is reminding us of our duty to our fellow man. Having received the grace of God through baptism, and made a part of the Christian community, we should show forth our love and gratitude to God through good works. Now it's

important to remember that we are not saved through our works—that happens through the grace of God alone—but we are both known and assured of our salvation through them. Or to return to the language of horticulture, the fruits which we bear originate in the root, which is Christ, not in the branches, which are all of us.

This leads us to our Gospel, which with its account of loaves and fishes and multitudes in the wilderness, may at first not seem to fit in with the agricultural imagery that we have in our first two readings, but if we pull back a bit, and consider the idea of nourishment alone, I think we'll see that it fits very well. To see what I mean here, think about what Our Lord does in our lesson—he takes bread, he gives thanks, he breaks it, and he distributes it to those who have listened to his teaching. This very same scene will be acted out, albeit on a more intimate stage not too far in his future, as we read in 1st Corinthians 11:

The same night in which he was betrayed took bread: And when he had given thanks, he brake it, and said, Take, eat: this is my body, which is broken for you: this do in remembrance of me.

If you hear in this passage, echoes of the Canon of the Mass, you're not mistaken. This verse makes up the better part of the Words of Institution, which the priest says at the moment of consecration. What this does, then, is connect the Miracle of the Loaves and Fishes, to the Last Supper, to the Sacrament of the Holy Communion. In short, it connects Jesus to us through a miraculous transformation of bread. It's no mistake that the Church uses the Story of the Feeding in the Wilderness on three separate Sundays during the year. It points to the Sacrament of the Altar, and the spiritual nourishment we receive therein. And in so doing it completes the message of our Major Propers.

That message is, I think, a curious paradox, in that it's both a recognition of our frailty and an affirmation of our strength. When we hear it, we understand that we are fallen, weak, and have no ability to save ourselves. However, by being grafted into the True Vine, we are strengthened to his purpose, and as members of the Body of Christ, are capable of doing great things in his service. We must, however, continually refresh and strengthen ourselves through prayer, through study, and opening ourselves up to the grace that flows down to us in the sacraments. And the wonderful thing about our liturgy is, having been reminded of these things by both the technology and the art of the Book of Common Prayer, we are offered the chance to receive that grace in Holy Communion, and so realize the truth of my text for today—*the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.*